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Transmission and Reconstruction of Gender through Dress: Hmong American New Year Rituals

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Abstract

This is the second of two articles focused on the role of dress in the formulation of Hmong American cultural life. The first article focused on the performance of two versions of Hmong American New Year and how dress is used by Hmong Americans to make sense of their position between the cultural world of the past and contemporary American culture. This paper centers on the transmission and reconstruction of female gender roles in the American context as expressed through women's headdress worn to the Hmong American New Year celebration. Both uses of dress arose out of attempts to reconcile the cultural life of the past with their lives in the United States; both are expressed visually through the dressed and evaluated body within the context of the Hmong New Year celebration.

Key Words: ritual, material culture, dress, Hmong

This paper is the second of two articles investigating how dress[1] is used in ritual celebrations to express and partially resolve conflicts dividing the Hmong American community. The first paper (Lynch, Detzner & Eicher, 1995) focused on conflict between generations and included a more extensive section on ethnographic background and methodology. This paper focuses on conflicts within the Hmong community concerning transmission and reconstruction of gender roles in the American context as expressed through women's headdress worn to the public New Year celebration. Headdresses were selected because members of the community expressed differing opinions about women's head-coverings which were related to changing attitudes toward female gender roles. Both uses of dress arose out of the Hmong Americans' attempts to reconcile the cultural life of the past with their lives in the United States, and both are visibly expressed through the dressed and evaluated body within the context of Hmong New Year. Both papers provide visual illustrations of Victor Turner's (1988) argument that ritual not only reflects but helps to formulate culture by providing a focused arena within which conflicts are displayed and debated.

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The theoretical underpinnings of our analysis rest on Victor Turner's work on tradition and performed ritual. Turner (1988) and others argued that meaning emerges out of traditional arts as they are reworked and transformed to express connections and conflicts between the past and present (Babcock, 1986; Berns, 1990; Bruner, 1986; Hodder, 1989; Turner & Bruner, 1986). Contemporary lives are thus interpreted in light of a relevant past with "cultural change, cultural continuity and cultural transmission" (Bruner, 1986, p. 12) all occurring at the same time within the context of performed ritual. The specific research question underlying this paper focuses on the transmission and reconstruction of gender.

Research conducted by Eisenhart and Holland (1983) on the cultural transmission of gender in the American context indicates that peer groups play a significant role in reproducing gendered attitudes and behaviors. They found that in school settings adolescent peer groups sometimes rebelled against adult expectations; however, in less formal situations, peer groups were found to influence individuals toward behavior compatible with the surrounding adult society. Eder and Parker (1987), also working within the United States, conducted ethnographic research examining the effect of school sponsored athletic events on the cultural

[1]Dress is defined as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings" (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1993, p. 15). Dress will be used as an all-encompassing term, and clothing where specifically applicable.

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transmission of gender. They argue persuasively for the movement of gender transmission research from formal school settings into real situations in which culture is studied as "lived experience" (p. 201).

Hamilton and Hamilton's (1989) ethonographic research among the Karen in Thailand documents and analyzes the symbolic importance of dress in the transmission of gender:

> Thus, *things*, material artifacts, in this case, dress, can have a powerful influence on the socialization of individuals and the continuance of a cultural system. For Karen women, married women's dress is critical for the culturally appropriate psychological state of a woman, for the continuity of the matrilineal tradition of cultural transmission, and for our understanding of the cultural system. (p. 20)

Likewise, Daly's (1984) work among the Kalabari of Nigeria analyzes and documents dress worn to indicate different stages of the female life cycle. With each successive stage the dressed woman is further adorned in symbols of cultural commitment related to assuming the expected gender roles of a fully mature Kalabari woman. Baizerman (1993), working in Israel with an artifact worn by men but produced by women, the *kippa sruga* (a skullcap worn by orthodox Jewish Israeli men), shows that gender expectations are reproduced through the production process itself:

> For a woman, the making of the *kippa sruga*, like many of the everyday activities engaged in by the skillful homemaker, may help define gender identity and fulfill a role as enabler of men in her family. Within the boundaries of home and community gender is reproduced as the young girl learns skills for a gendered repertoire. (p. 102)

Thus dress, worn by self or others, is often a potent symbol of cultural continuity in which gendered behavior and expectations for women are expressed. In our research we will show that as gender roles are transmitted and reconstructed, dress is used to express changes as well as connections to the past.

Ethnographic Setting and Data Gathering

Population

The Lao Hmong living in the United States originally migrated out of China in the early 19th century into northern Lao hill country. Laotian Hmong refugees were relocated to the United States as a result of the Vietnam War. The Minnesota State Refugee Office unofficially estimates that, in 1991, there were approximately 24,000 Hmong refugees living in the state, with 95% of them living within the St. Paul/Minneapolis metropolitan area. We conducted fieldwork between November 1987 and November 1990 among teenage and young adult Hmong Americans living in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Fieldwork Methods

Following the recommendations of Eisenhart and Holland (1983) and Eder and Parker (1987), we conducted fieldwork in social situations which would allow us to observe and document interaction among peers. Fieldwork by Lynch (1992) included tutoring Hmong students in high school classrooms and in their homes, interviews conducted at sports events and in private homes, a weekend camping trip with a high school Hmong American culture club as well as extensive fieldwork at the annual New Year celebration.[2] Historical and cultural background to the research problem was provided by life history interviews conducted by the second author with male and female Hmong elders. The New Year was chosen as a research focus due to our interest in the ritual as an arena in which change is negotiated as well as its central role in the lives of Hmong American teenagers. While many teenage females are not allowed to attend school sponsored sporting events, most are encouraged by their families to take part in the New Year festivities. Therefore a larger and more diverse social grouping was observed and interviewed at the New Year than might be possible at school sponsored social events. The interpretive integrity of this research is strengthened through the use of triangulation across researchers, methods and sites (Burgess, 1984; Denzin, 1978a, 1978b).

Background Information

Socio-Economic Background

The Laotian Hmong who relocated to the United States arrived relatively unprepared for life in the industrialized West. The Hmong Resettlement Study, a national project funded by the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, reported in 1984 that most (92%) came from rural backgrounds and many (72%) were not able to read or write in their native language. Missionary efforts in the 1950s provided the Hmong with a written form of language, but many Lao Hmong never learned to read and write the script. Baizerman and Hendricks' (1988) study of Southeast Asian youth points out the special difficulties confronting Hmong American youth because of high rates of welfare dependency compared to the other Southeast Asian populations.

The problems of cultural economic assimilation are compounded by the fact that Hmong Americans continue to marry and have children when they are still in their teenage years as they did in Laos (Hutchinson & McNall, 1994). The high rate of teenage marriage and pregnancy coupled with the high rate of welfare assistance often trap young families into a cycle of dependency which is difficult to break. These problems are intensified by divisions within the Hmong American community because of gender and age differences. While many conflicts divide and hamper

[2]Primary fieldwork on the New Year celebration was carried out by the first author. However, all three authors attended one or more public celebrations in St. Paul.

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the Hmong American community, two stand out as particularly divisive and critical: (1) conflict between generations and (2) conflict centered upon a redefinition of female gender role in the United States (Detzner, 1992). While attention in the first paper focused on conflict between generations, this paper focuses upon gender-based conflict.

Sources and Forms of Gender-Role Conflict

Both male and female teenagers interviewed for this study introduced the topic of gender-based conflict within Hmong American families and among Hmong American teenagers. A teenage boy expressed his awareness of and sensitivity to the dramatic differences between females role in Lao Hmong society and females role in the United States:

> I have feelings about that [women's roles]. I guess I have been brought up here and I see American women's role, the Hmong has just had it differently. Women are always second, they eat second, they do everything second. The men are sort of in charge. I have a slightly different thought about that because I have been raised here. (M-05)[3]

The problematic relationship between teenage Hmong American males and females was a playful, but pointed, focus of joking on a camping trip Lynch participated in during fieldwork. One female leader, a strong-willed high school senior, made a special point of prodding the boys to help with the camp chores, chores which old style Hmong women would have carried out. A feisty pair of female tent mates played an on-going joking game through the two days; one played the role of the old-style wife and one played the role of the old-style husband. To the amusement of the audience, the husband repeatedly bossed the wife in an exaggerated display of dominance. In addition to appropriate work roles in the family, conflicts between the males and females tended to center on issues of marriage, sexuality, and definitions of female success.

Marriage

The questions surrounding appropriate male and female gender roles in the United States have caused internal problems within the community. Central issues were the freedom to date and appropriate age of marriage. Both Hmong custom and the American legal system pose problems. With parental approval, early marriage continues to be practiced in Minnesota, despite Minnesota laws prohibiting girls under 16 from marrying. Hmong American teenagers said that common marriage ages for girls were between 15 and 18. Teenage females expressed concern over the pressure they felt from their families to follow the dictates of the past by marrying and beginning their families while still teenagers.

Teenage females bound for college often expressed concern over delaying their marriage to get an education. Their concerns are double-edged. First, the opportunity to meet and marry a husband is greater when the girls are still in high school. If they wait, they risk being labeled too old and no longer "desirable." Second, teenage females realize that Hmong American men are often hesitant to marry women with higher levels of education than their own. As most Hmong American women want to marry within their own community, they often say that they hinder their chances to make an appropriate match by increasing their level of education. The following is a response given by a female teenager when asked whether she felt pressured to marry after graduating form high school, "...for the Hmong, 16 is an old age to get married. I do kind of feel pressure that if I go to college I will never get married because I went to college" (F-03). Bride prices, which are paid to the bride's family by the groom's family, are often said to decrease if the bride is well-educated.

Sexuality

Changing attitudes in America toward sexual activity outside of marriage, which in Laos was not acceptable, have resulted in conflicts focused on appropriate and acceptable sexual behavior. In 1991 two professional Hmong American men in Minnesota were convicted of criminal sexual misconduct; both men claim to have had sexual relations with consenting Hmong American women (Hammond, 1991). Goldstein's (1986) case study of sexual assault case between a 14 year old girl and a 19 year old boy points out that the assaults occur as a result of the exposure of teenagers to both Hmong and American attitudes toward sexual activity. She describes the young man's feelings regarding the incident:

> Pao was suffering from cultural disorientation and misunderstanding of American sexual mores. His interpretation of what he saw and heard of America high school males' behavior initially led him to expect leniency, if not support, from Americans for his own behavior. He perceived his sexual aggressiveness as a permissible blend of American and Hmong actions. He was taking advantage of the context of the weakened Hmong social controls and experimenting with his own version of a "liberated" American male. (p. 140)

Appropriate sexual behavior for Hmong American teenage females is also a point of debate with the community. At the 1991 Second Annual Conference of Hmong Women Pursuing Education held in Wisconsin, an older woman stood up and passionately said, "In Laos we lived in houses without windows and without doors to lock and our daughters did not get pregnant. Here there are windows and doors that lock and our daughters get pregnant." Middle generation speakers at the conference made a point of telling mothers in the audience that they need to talk to their daughters about birth control, a controversial topic within the Hmong American community.

[3]Information drawn from the Teen of the Year interviews by Lynch is coded according to gender and subject number throughout this paper.

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Definitions of Success

While gender role stress for males often focuses upon appropriate sexual conduct, females must, in addition, balance Hmong and American notions of success. To marry young and to have children, and thus be assured of a valued role within the community, remains important to Hmong American women; however, teenage marriage and raising a family conflict with achieving success as it is measured on American terms. The first author tutored young mothers at an area high school. The female students who balanced school work with motherhood missed many days of school and had difficulty completing their homework. At the women's conference in Wisconsin, women repeatedly addressed the problem of finding affordable daycare for children in order to attend college classes.

Successful adult Hmong American women, aware of the gender role stresses of their younger counterparts, attempt to provide support and guidance to the young women. Houa Moua, a prominent woman in the Eau Claire, Wisconsin Hmong American community, gave the keynote address at the luncheon during the conference in Menomonie. She closed by telling a story expressing the message that young Hmong American women, though tempted to seek marriage partners outside the community, should remain true to self and marry within their own community. The story, as translated, follows:

> A rat wanted to marry the best and most powerful man in the world. The first man the rat chose to marry was the moon. But then she said to herself, the moon is not so powerful. The light of the moon can be covered by a cloud. I should marry the cloud. So the second man the rat chose to marry was a cloud. But then the rat said to herself, a cloud is not so powerful, a cloud can be pushed by the wind. So the third man the rat chose to marry was the wind. But then the rat said to herself, the wind is not so powerful, it cannot push the mountain. So the fourth man the rat chose to marry was a mountain. But then the rat said to herself, a mountain is not so powerful. A rat can gnaw a hole in a mountain. And so the rat decided to marry a rat.

The story was warmly received and drew smiles of understanding from the all female audience. These young females are struggling to figure out who they are in relationship to male peers and potential mates. They understand that they must respect their own men in order to respect themselves and to contribute to the well-being and strength of the Hmong American community. But the role they are asked to play by their male peers is a difficult one. Hmong American teenage boys are American enough to want to marry an American style woman, yet they also want a Hmong spouse, someone who will tether them to their own cultural roots. This frustration was voiced in the afternoon session of the conference in Menomonie when a college girl stood up and declared: "Hmong women go to college and [learn to] expect different things [in their lives]. Hmong men go to college and expect the same things [gender roles of the past] from their wives."

Hmong American New Year's Dress

The role of the New Year as a focus of courtship within the community makes it a logical arena in which to express the conflict surrounding appropriate gender roles for Hmong American women. As teenagers return from college they carry with them new ideas concerning male and female gender roles, and they discuss and debate these ideas with their former school mates. Dress becomes a visual expression of the debate. Like their male peers, teenage females visually express ethnic pride through the wearing of traditional dress, but they simultaneously express attitudes about Hmong and American gender roles through the choices they make within the range of styles of New year apparel. Their dress becomes not only a statement of ethnic identity (Lynch, 1995), but gendered identity as well.

Because of the meanings carried by women's headdress which were revealed in our early fieldwork, we focused on the role of women's headdress in the transmission and reconstruction of female gender roles. The objective of our research was to discern patterns of response gathered in the field to the two versions of female headdress most typically worn to the New Year, and relate those patterns to the transmission and reconstruction of gender. Our over-all goal was to illustrate the role of dress in the expression and resolution of conflict concerning female gender roles in the American context.

Hmong American New Year

The Hmong New Year is an annual celebration which traditionally fell at the end of the agricultural year. Families gathered to celebrate the harvest and prepare, through ritual actions, for the beginning of the year. The public New Year in St. Paul was celebrated over the Thanksgiving weekend in a large civic center and focused primarily on teenagers and young adults. The public New Year celebrations in communities throughout the United States are staggered to allow families to attend many of the festivals. The celebration in St. Paul draws Hmong Americans from throughout the country due to the large population of Hmong in the area. Males from as far away as California come to the New Year in St. Paul attempting to become acquainted with potential mates. A teenage girl said that potential mates from out-of-state ask for addresses so "they can write to you or get to know you. That is a way to getting to know you" (F-01).

The youthful focus of the New Year is primarily due to its importance as a courtship arena. The New Year in Laos was the time of year when families gathered together to bring young people into contact with potential mates from other villages. In the American context, courtship is still a primary function of the celebration. The courtship ritual ball toss game played at the New Year in Laos is still played in the United States and provides a way for young people to get acquainted. As a ball is tossed back and forth, young girls and boys get to know each other. In Laos they sang a style of call and response poetry. While this is still sometimes practiced in the United States, many of the young people no longer know how to do it. Communica-

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tion between males and females remains an important function of the ritual. When asked about the function of ball toss, a male teenager said "It is to communicate with girls. That is the only way we can meet new girls. You first of all have to test her mind. He has to find out if she can do what he wants. If she cannot do what he wants, they do not marry" (M-03).

Over the course of the three years Lynch observed that the public New Year in St. Paul also functions as a reunion for young men and women attending colleges throughout the Midwest. Hmong American teenagers in the Twin Cities generally graduate from high schools with relatively high proportions of Hmong American students because they tend to lived in ethnic neighborhoods and public housing developments within the metropolitan area. Students living outside of Hmong American neighborhoods are often bussed to schools offering intensive programs of English as a Second Language. While private colleges in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area often have sizable numbers of Hmong American students, colleges in the rural areas do not. In casual discussions at the New Year, many students attending small private colleges said that it was difficult to adjust to being isolated from their Hmong American peers. Therefore, the annual New Year celebration was important to these returning college students because it gave them an opportunity to "be Hmong again."

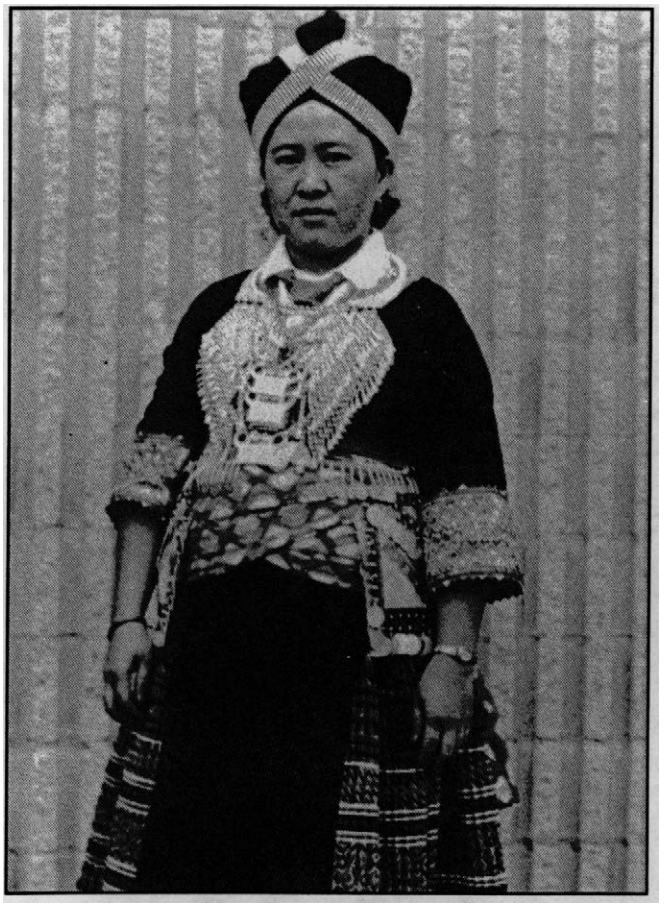

Figure 1. Turban headdress ensemble. Photograph by Lynch

New Year's Dress

Traditional styles of Lao Hmong dress are worn by both male and female teenagers to the New Year (see Lynch, Detzner & Eicher, 1995 for a more developed discussion). Related to the cited research (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1989; Daly, 1984; Baizerman, 1992), exploratory interviews and observations revealed patterns of response indicating a symbolic link between gender transmission and reconstruction and traditional styles of dress worn by teenage females to the New Year. For example, a teenage male said he liked girls better in Hmong clothes rather than American style dress because "it brings out the Hmong in the girls I suppose" (M-01). Another male teenager said that he would not let his sister go to the New Year "in American clothes because it is a way to celebrate our culture and if I see American clothes is sort of staying that they are not valuing it as much anymore" (M-05). Males tend to be judged less harshly for wearing American styles of dress to the New Year. Teenage girls often said they thought the boys looked good in both American and Hmong dress. This response is typical, "Some of the boys when they wear Hmong clothes, they look really good in them. Really dashing and everything you know. They look OK in American clothes too, but it doesn't really matter. It is the same to me" (F-03). Most of the girls prefer to wear American style dress, yet feel an obligation to wear Hmong style dress as a recognition of cultural background. This response is typical, "I prefer American clothes. But still I wouldn't mind wearing my Hmong clothes, because it is what I am, it is a part of me" (F-06).

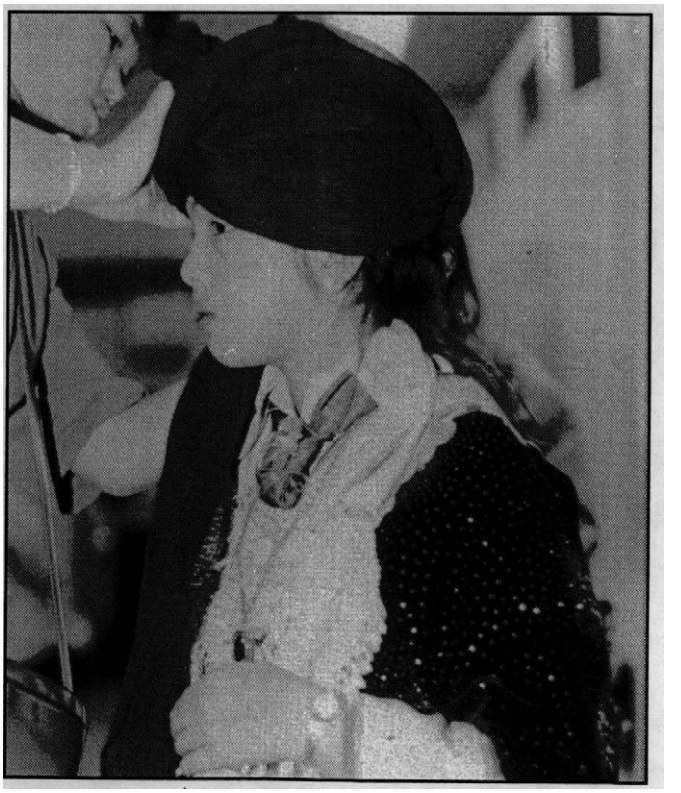

Figure 2. Turban being wrapped. Photograph by Lynch

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Figure 3. Rooster style New Year hat. Photograph by Lynch

Most females wear some version of headdress when they wear Hmong style dress. Within Laos smaller subgroups of Hmong wore visually distinct headdress styles, some of which are illustrated in Figure 4. As fieldwork progressed we found that the two most common versions of women's headdress worn to the New Year by teenage females carried different meaning within the community. Both headdress styles are related historically to smaller subgroups of Lao Hmong. The turban style (Figure 1) was formerly worn by a White Hmong subgroup. It is customarily a 12 foot length of dark maroon Vietnamese silk (Cubbs, 1986) wound around the head (Figure 2) to create a rounded dark form. The second style (Figure 3) is a rooster style hat made of cotton and synthetic fabrics which rests upon, rather wraps, around the head. It is called rooster style because of the shapes on the top resembling a cockscomb. The closest prototype to this style hat exists in the Green Hmong tradition as a children's hat. Hats are usually purchased from sewers who have completed the basic construction of the hat and added the appliqued and embroidered designs. Women within individual families then further decorate the hats with a range of trims including aluminum coins, metal balls, yarn pom poms, rickrack and sequins to create a visually complex and reflective surface. These hats are premiere examples of cultural authentication (Erekosima & Eicher, 1981; see Lynch, Detzner & Eicher, 1995 for a more developed discussion).

The turban style is generally classified by Hmong Americans as old style Hmong, whereas the hat form is widely interpreted as modern or new style American Hmong (see Lynch, 1995 for a more developed discussion). Typical comments on the two hat styles included this one from a teenage male when asked about the rooster style hat, "it is not really Hmong, it is just a couple years old, it is modernized Hmong" (M-05). One girl (among many) when asked to compare the hat to her turban commented that her turban was "more traditional" (F-04). The classification of the turban as the more "traditional" of the two headdress styles is *not* based upon costume history as both turbans and hats have historical prototypes and could therefore be defended as traditional. Neither the hat nor turban form was universally worn by all the Hmong subgroups

Figure 4. Hmong style dress with high heels. Photograph by Lynch

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prior to their arrival in the United States. Therefore neither has universal significance within the community in terms of patterns of historical use. Both are now worn as marks of more general Hmong American identity by women from all the formerly distinct Lao Hmong subgroups (see Lynch, 1995). Most young women interviewed said that they wore both styles for different occasions within the two day New Year celebration.

Turbans are associated in the minds of the Hmong with traditional systems of meaning. One older man directly tied the turban style headdress to the world of the ancestors, dismissing the hat as bound only to contemporary reality, "The turbans are the custom. The hats are the new things and are not from the ancestors" (M-01). Even within a Green Hmong family who expressed pride in the rooster hat due to its relationship to their subgroup, the turban was deemed the more traditional of the two headdress styles. The father told Lynch that he liked the hats "because of the Hmong people" (F-03). His daughter then translated for her father, "He says that his parents made them like the hat. Yes, but they were different. Not like the one now" (F-03). They both went on to say that neither headdress style was worn by women from their subgroup in Laos, but that hats were the more "modern" (F-03) choice in America.

Young women elect to wear the turban form when they are making a public presentation of themselves as committed to Hmong history and culture or when they are trying to please their relatives or other elders within the community. Many of the Hmong Teen of the Year contestants that were interviewed stressed that, as contestants, they were expected to pay respect to their cultural past by wearing older styles of Hmong dress. For example, one of the contestants for Teen of the Year commented that while she wore her hat most of the day, when it came time to give her speech on stage she "wore the turban with stripes [striped turban tie] because we were supposed to wear our most traditional stuff" (F-01). Speeches given by the contestants tended to focus on the need to maintain cultural ties to the past as well as adjust to life in America. Small numbers of Hmong American girls, particularly those who have given up many other aspects of Hmong culture, are committed to the turban because they associate it with authentic Hmong culture and the past. One female contestant, with a history of minimal involvement in Hmong cultural life in St. Paul, said she liked the turban better because, "It is more traditional and it looks better. I don't like the hats. They are too new. I mean they are so contemporary you know. I like the old" (F-02). She was one of the few teenage females who dismissed the value of the hat and preferred the turban.

Most teenage girls, even if they admitted to liking to wear the turban to express commitment to the past, also wore the hat to different events within the two day celebration. Teenage females often have arguments with their female relatives focused upon the girl's desire to wear the hat rather than the turban to the New Year. The following quote in which a teenage female describes an exchange with her older aunt, captures this tension, "Well, if I don't want to wear the turban and I am very determined not to wear it, she would give up and say fine, you wear the hat" (F-03). One female contestant wore a turban to the New Year for the first time when she competed for Teen of the Year. She expressed pride in the turban form, and said that it was "unique...it was more traditional" (F-04). She had attended the New Year regularly before that, always wearing a hat. She commented that her parents preferred the turbans because the hats were "too Americanized" (F-04), but that she had always worn a hat in the past. The year she was interviewed she wore the turban for a part of the day, as she felt as a contestant for Teen of the Year she should dress as traditionally as possible.

When combined with other old style dress, the turban form helps to emphasize a rounded and relatively plump ideal of beauty which was historically valued within the Hmong community. Lao Hmong women's marriageability was strongly associated with her ability to work and produce children, therefore a sturdy healthy woman was highly prized. As can be seen in Figure 1, the waist area in all styles of Hmong dress is heavily layered creating a bulky, strong image. The calves of the legs are also frequently wrapped to create the look of a heavy, solid leg. As succinctly and directly stated by a teenage girl during an interview, "It [Hmong style dress] makes you look fat. When you are fat and you wear Hmong [dress] you look fatter" (F-05). This idealization of the rounded body form fits well within the traditional definition of female success, as primarily focused upon child-bearing ability and good health.

The cultural meaning carried by the turban is further supported by observing the act of putting on and removing both the turban and the hat. Older women watching the New Year festivities from the Civic Center balcony, unwrap and rewrap their turbans without moving their eyes or attention from the stage show below. However, such practiced ability is rare among younger Hmong American women. The turbans are only worn for photographs and celebrations and few girls learn to wrap their own. As a result, young females are heavily dependent upon their mothers and other older women to help them wrap their turbans properly. When a girl is having her turban tied, she typically rests on her knees in a dependent pose in front of the person wrapping for her (Figure 2). The implied dependence is further amplified by the continual "fixing of the turban" by mothers and other female relatives throughout the day. This dependency is a constant reminder to the teenage girls of the restrictions placed upon their lives by the dictates of female gender roles as transmitted to them by their older female relatives. The act of being dressed by others places these young women under the care of their families, a position harkening back to the sexual and courtship patterns of Laos.

In contrast, the hats are associated with fashion and the casual American life style many of the girls are attempting to capture. They are the most popular form of headdress among the teenage females. The hats' scalloped edge and active reflective surface are interpreted as fashionable, colorful and pretty by young Hmong American women. One young woman said she liked the hat better because, "For me it is more fashionable. It has more color and is pretty. That is why I wear it. It is easy to put it on and take if off and put it on again. But the other one [the turban], if you mess it up you have to take it all off and do it over again" (F-03). Hmong American girls like the hats, because they can pop them on their heads, thereby asserting independence from

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their older female relatives. A girl wearing a new style hat is on her own for the day, whereas a girl wearing a turban is usually the focus of continued scrutiny and attention though the day. This mimics the independent life style young Hmong American women think is appropriate in America. Like their peers at school, young Hmong American women want to socialize and date freely. Many want to make their own choices regarding marriage and college plans.

In the arena of the New Year, the new style hats are practical. The girls come to the St. Paul Civic Center with suitcases filled with clothing changes for the various events during the day. As the girls change from Hmong style dress in the afternoon to American party clothes for the dance in the evening, the hats are easily put aside leaving the girl's hairdo relatively undamaged from an afternoon of wear. In contrast, when the tightly wrapped turbans are unwound, the hair has been flattened and is difficult to restyle. This was often a source of complaint as Lynch observed girls change from Hmong style to American style dress in the public restrooms, preparing for the dance in the evening.

Males, particularly those who have lived in the United States for a significant period of time, generally prefer the turban form on females. Teenage boys are much more apt than their female counterparts to dismiss the rooster hats as "simply American". The value placed upon the hat is often negatively influenced by the fact that the boy judging it feels it is too "Americanized." For example, one boy said about the hats, "I think it looks cheap" (M-01). Men and boys who had recently immigrated were less judgmental. One boy replied, "I like them both [the hats and the turbans]. They are both pretty. But this [the turban] is the custom. But the [rooster] hat, they just made them up" (M-02). His father also liked both but felt the turban matched "the rest of the costume better" (M-02). Visually, the point made by the father makes sense. We observed that the mixing of old style elements with the new style American influences often creates a visual expression in which the heaviness achieved by the layering of the waist and calf is contradicted by the strong upward thrust of a spiked high heel (Figure 4). Ensembles which combine the new style hat, less layering of the waist, and high heels conform much more closely to the slim Western ideal which many Hmong American girls are now attempting to mimic. The pointed rooster hat form, long hair, and high heels make the body appear longer. The decreased layering of the waist results in a leaner, more American look. The importance placed upon child-bearing ability is minimized in favor of an ideal stressing conformity to American notions of beauty and success.

The negative response to the hats and the often leaner, more American look seems to be a learned response. In interviews, males who have lived in the United States for a number of years often associated women wearing Hmong style dress with authenticity and cultural integrity. For example, when a young man was asked whether he preferred women in Hmong or American dress, he said:

> I would probably say Hmong clothes. It is like, sometimes when the girls wear American clothing, it is not them you are looking at it is more their clothing. It is like they hide themselves behind their clothing. There are situations where a girl can have a lot of nice clothing but be so different. With Hmong clothes, it is like every wears the same and I don't know, it brings out the Hmong in the girls I suppose. (M-01)

The more Americanized hair styles are also a source of controversy. Hairstyles are more noticeable when women wear the new style hats. Hmong women's hair is typically dark and contrasts markedly with the light colors in the hats. In addition, the style of the hat allows the wearer more experimentation and variety in hair dress than the turban. Generally, women wearing the turban cover the hair completely. Many of the male's negative comments about the hats centered on the fact that the women's hair was loose. For example, the following are comments from a male teenager:

> My dad says the girls come here and wear the hats and their hair all hangs down and it covers their face and it doesn't show a lot of beauty. That is what the older generation is looking for and why they have the turbans to show off the beauty. All the girls [wearing the turbans] have their hair back. Now the girls come here and it is all hanging over their eyes. I think it looks cheap. (M-01)

This points toward the role of headdress and its evaluation by others in the expression of conflict centered upon female gender role in the community. It is not simply that the boy and his father prefer the turban to the hat, but they feel the hat looks "cheap." Turbans, in the above comment, are associated with beauty and value. Hats are associated with "coming here" and women losing beauty, losing value.

Even males who were willing to define their own extravagantly Americanized Hmong style dress as traditional were unwilling to define the hat as traditional. During an interview with a young man, Lynch commented that the ensemble he had worn to the past New Year was a quite modern interpretation of the older styles. He replied, "Yes, it is a modern interpretation" (M-05). When asked why he said "it [the rooster hat] is not really Hmong—it is modernized. Modernized Hmong" (M-05), and therefore not traditional, he defended the authenticity of his own ensemble by saying that is was composed of the same basic dress components as in the past but "just has different decorations" (M-05). His comment indicated that the *form* rather than the surface detail made the connection with the past. The hats, being clearly a different form than the turbans, in his mind made a clear, formal break from old style female dress. Despite her older brother's reservations concerning the authenticity of the hat, this young man's sister consistently wore the hat to the New Year, indicating different opinions within families as to appropriate Hmong headdress for women.

The young man's argument that the rooster hats were not traditional is an indication of the importance of formal characteristics in the debate centered on women's headdress within the Hmong American community. As both turbans and hats have historical prototypes, each thus could be defended as traditional. The turban form worn by young

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Hmong American women marks cultural transmission and continuity, whereas the hat marks cultural change and transformation. The hat, decorated with sequins, lurex, and other shiny objects, reflects light. This is in sharp contrast to the dark-colored round silhouette of the turban. Preference by many young Hmong American women for the hat challenges the authority of males and elders who typically prefer the turban. The head coverings reveal differences of opinion and meaning about the role of women within Hmong American culture.

Summary and Conclusions

Teenage Hmong American males' desire for their female peers to dress in the old style turban for the New Year is a visible sign of the debate between and within young male and female Hmong Americans as they attempt to define emerging gender roles for women. The New Year, as a focus of courtship within the community, is a logical arena in which to debate proper gender roles for Hmong American women. The teenage male's continuing preference for the turban is visible expression of his commitment to Hmong heritage as well as his reluctance to accept changing gender roles for women. Our research demonstrates that within ritual performances, objects not only reflect but help to formulate cultural systems (Geertz, 1973). Debates surrounding women's headdress not only reflect but help to create new roles for Hmong American women in the United States. As a Hmong American male college student or an older relative struggles to accept (and find aesthetically pleasing) the wearing of a new style hat by a teenage female, they are also struggling to accept the new roles she may play as a college educated female.

Our research on headdress suggests that visual art forms, especially those interrelated with the human form, are material embodiments of cultural worlds. As a result of the creation, perception, and evaluation of visual arts forms, aspects of culture are transformed. As members of the Hmong American community develop new criteria for the judgment of female beauty, they also develop new criteria for what makes a good woman, a Hmong American woman, a woman who both carries the treasures of the past on her back and embraces the new American world. The heated debates surrounding the value and authenticity of the rooster style hat point toward the formative role of the New Year ritual, and dress in particular, in the creation of Hmong American cultural identity. What is superficially discussed is the value of a hat; what is more significantly debated is the flexibility of Hmong cultural life in the American context. As Hmong Americans create, debate, and judge their own traditional dress, they simultaneously reformulate their culture in response to their new environment. They learn what it means to be a Hmong American by making and judging dress reflecting the past and molding the present.

Specifically, in the area of gender research, we illustrate a point made by Howard Morphy in response to the series of papers presented as a part of the Oxford "Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning" workshop held in April, 1989. Dress both marks and creates gender (workshop papers now published, Barnes & Eicher, 1993). In situations of cultural contact, in which women are struggling to mark ethnic integrity *and* express a flexible and realistic response to new circumstances, dress becomes a means of negotiating identity using forms of dress that carry meaning from the past and negotiate meaning in the present. Newly emergent versions of gendered identity are formulated as the dressed body is presented and evaluated.

Interpretations posed in our two papers vividly illustrate the active formative role of dress within the ritual context. In the Hmong American community, dress does not simply *reflect* a cultural world—it is helping to *formulate* a cultural world. As a public display of what it means to be a Hmong American, New Year's dress is a flexible and expressive medium. As an aspect of material culture, it gives voice to the central debates threatening the cohesiveness of the community. Dress used within ritual performances offers the opportunity to observe and capture culture in the making. Our research complements and illustrates Turner's (1988) work by moving material culture and its transformation into the ritual arena. As argued by Turner and his followers, and visibly brought to life by our research, "cultural change, cultural continuity and cultural transmission" (Bruner, 1986, p. 12) all occur within the context of the New Year and are expressed through the dressed and evaluated body. As the past is brought to life through ritual reenactment, so it is reinterpreted in light of present concerns and realities, in a visible display of what it means to be Hmong in America.

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